

Curvin

He got to be the first African American mayor in a major city in the Northeast.

West

Like you, I was involved in civil rights organizations. In those days, they were active. Unfortunately, they are not supported like they were those days. In fact I remember NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner. I would show up to ballroom at the [unintelligible 00:00:34] Hotel. Nowadays, they're lucky to get 300 to 400 people. We were involved for the right reasons. We thought that housing should be improved, job opportunities should be better. We got involved with some of the local politicians. You remember Harry Wheeler, George Richardson? Tommy, it was the union guys. In fact, if you remember, we formed an organization called the United Essex Civic Association.

Curvin

That's right.

West

George Richardson was the president. I forgot who the vice president was. I think was the [unintelligible 00:01:26] Brothers. One of them was a vice president. They decided to get involved in the political movement. They were always involved. In fact, George Richardson, if you recall, was an assemblyman at the time. They decided to get involved in fighting City Hall. City Hall at that time was [unintelligible 00:01:56]. It finally came to the point where they decided that somebody should run for mayor. Since they all thought it was going to be a losing battle, I became the sacrificial lamb, which is good. I didn't know any better.

We started off by saying that somebody should run. They decided I should be the candidate. I said no. We floundered for a while. Six weeks before Election Day, I decided, maybe I'll try this. We got involved and got petitions signed. I think we had \$2,000 in the whole campaign. I came in third out of-- if I recall, it was about six candidates. Mickey Vaughn Tempo was a candidate, George Castellano was a candidate. [unintelligible 00:03:04] was a candidate, Leo Collins was a candidate. Me and there was one other person. [unintelligible 00:03:10] the other Italian guy, [unintelligible 00:03:12]

Curvin

[unintelligible 00:03:14]

West

[unintelligible 00:03:14] He was the lawyer. Lo and behold, I came in third out of all these guys, very close third to Leo Collins. Man, we did all that with no money, no nothing. It took a lot of energy. We had the entity, they had the money, we had the energy. That's how I got involved.

Curvin

You were in a sense, a stalking horse. The idea that George was really--

West

Yes. George was the real candidate.

Curvin

-was going to be the real candidate.

West

When the real-time came, George was going to be the candidate.

Curvin

Right after the election then, you made the decision that, "I can do this myself."

West

I decided that if I could do that well in six weeks with no money, then I just was just keep running. We kept doing the things that we knew best. Going to see people, getting involved in civil rights organizations, going to the meetings. BICC was still active.

**Curvin**

You were the co-chair-

**West**

I was co-chair of BICC.

**Curvin**

-with one of the businessmen.

**West**

Right.

**Curvin**

And Charlie Carson?

**West**

Charlie Carson was there. At that time, I think it was Bill Hoffman who was the other co-chair. We ended up continuing to be active. I got to be the candidate and the co-chairman because George, like he always did, he started something, then he couldn't or didn't want to do the work. I ended up doing the work of becoming the co-chairman. It was very good. I enjoyed it.

**Curvin**

The Business and Industrial Coordinating Committee, BICC, actually was a path-breaking innovation in a way because it really opened some doors for people.

**West**

It was really a real pioneering operation. If you recall Bill Mercer, Bill was very close to what I call the welfare federation type guys. They were always busy. The Hank Bordens of the world, those guys who were part of what I called the red feather organizations. He helped to put to details, together for that. He was always the clerk of the works. We formed that organization, George became the titular head on the Civil Rights side. He would lead organizations, so picketing the major business guys, so we had to have some peace.

You were out there throwing the rocks so we were out there trying to save the rest of the guys who got COVID and the core folks. It was funny. We had to have the simulators, we had to have the people who are-- what we would call rabble-rousers in those days. The peaceful guys like me and the other guys just sat around the table with the business guys to save them from you.

**Curvin**

You joined the BICC.

**West**

I know you did. Frankly, the reason that BICC was successful because if they were not, the direct action is to pick us. Those guys would never have listened to us. When Charlie [unintelligible 00:07:40], the rest of those guys talked to us, if there were not some people out there [unintelligible 00:07:47] That ended up being my role for the next few years.

**Curvin**

The anti-poverty program as well, you played a major role.

**West**

Right. Because of the nature of the-- I don't know what bill that was, the National bill that funded the community action agencies. If you remember how you act on the ten o'clock, they had written-- Frankly, they had written a blueprint for community action agencies around the country. They had

copied some of the things from Chicago, if you remember, but they made the, again, the blueprint. How you act was the nature of the beginning of community action agencies all over the country.

**Curvin**

Your sense was that the community action programs provided real opportunity for a lot of people.

**West**

They were opposed by the existing political structure for a right reason, because once you start organizing people, then the next step for them is to run for office. If you recall, we were a community action agency, we had area boards, which was structured just like any other political structure, and they became the basis for those of us who got involved in politics, to run because we were then a political structure without portfolio-

**Curvin**

With resources

**West**

-with money, federal government money to a structured organization. In fact, we were better financed than some of the folks who were in the Democratic Party Politics, district leaders. We were better financed than the districts leaders.

**Curvin**

When you got up to approaching 1970, and you were again, putting all your energy into the campaign in 1970, there was this debate about who the candidate really was going to be still. Harry Will was still out there.

**West**

Oh, yes.

**Curvin**

George was still out there. Tell a little bit about that background.

**West**

Those of us who were interested in making sure that there was a viable campaign, did a number of things. We started to use the traditional Block Club organizations, the civil rights organizations, and they came up with the idea. I'm not sure whose original structure that was. I think that Baraka and a few other people started talking about a convention, which terrified of most of the existing political folks when you start talking about having a convention because they didn't think it would work. They didn't think that Black folks should isolate themselves or identify themselves as just being Black.

They should work within the political structures. In those days, it was a Democratic Party.

Those people who were tied to the existing organization didn't want us to get involved and talking about and running candidates because that theoretically was in opposition to them. When the Black and Puerto Rican Convention became a reality, they were planning for it, then the argument was, who would have the right to participate? Who would have a vote? They argued, balanced, weighted voting. If you recall, some people wanted to have traditional organizations that had a lot of members that had more votes than the Block Club. If you remember, the final analysis was everybody had the same vote.

If you had a Block Club, you had as many votes as the NAACP, and that's what allowed us to go around and get everybody to participate because they had a right now to be heard. Come to a convention and vote, be a delegate. [chuckles]

**Curvin**

Of course, I remember that convention very well because Baraka had had a convention in 1968 November for the council seats.

West

Right.

Curvin

Right. You were at some point talking to me and saying, "Curvin, I think you got to run this convention in 1970 because we can't let this be a Nationalistic type of event."

West

It didn't have the right [unintelligible 00:13:50].

Curvin

[crosstalk]-

[laughter]

Curvin

-to say the least.

West

What we put together, I think, was a more acceptable format which allowed-- If you remember Larry Karius and his Block Club thing, allowed people to participate in it. 13th Street, 13th Avenue. People who had just a Block Club-

Curvin

Showed up.

West

-showed up. We had more people in that convention, I think, than any civil organization in the history of the city. It was good. My campaign was to talk to everybody who had a vote. We talked to everybody. We got them to come and join up. We campaigned with them. We talked about how they were going to participate and the fact that they would have a voice.

Curvin

You talked to everybody, including White brothers in the city?

West

Oh, yes.

Curvin

Tell us, how do you balance or measure the support you had from the Black community, the Puerto Rican community, and the White community?

West

The advantage I think we had, was that the convention was built as a Black and Puerto Rican Convention. In reality, it was mostly Black. There were some Puerto Rican activists, just Hidalgo and some of the other folks from that community.

Curvin

[unintelligible 00:15:50]

West

[unintelligible 00:15:51], [unintelligible 00:15:55]. We ended up with some activists of Puerto Ricans. Some of them threw rocks at us. I remember Ramon Lavera being one who would be in and out. He never knew where he was going to be, but we ended up putting together that convention with the idea that we would have some Black candidates and some Puerto Rican candidates, and it started off. Most of the people didn't want to be involved. Then when they found out this thing was going to be possibly successful and we were going to have a ticket, that we had a lot of people fighting to get on that ticket. I think that's one of our greatest successes, when people start wanting to join up.

Curvin

That campaign began and you had your own campaign organization, but Baraka had a very active and vibrant group of his followers who were backing your candidacy. In the final analysis, how do you rate or evaluate the support that you got from Baraka?

West

We got a letter of support from him that was good. Realistic and good. The best thing that he did for the campaign was to bring in college students from around the country. We had college students, if you recall, living and sleeping in vacant apartments in the public housing projects, who came in. They had been organized by Baraka and his crew. Then all of a sudden, we heard he was negative and that I had to explain that I was not controlled by him every day. It was like, I guess, Kennedy saying he wasn't controlled by a Pope. [chuckles] Every day, somebody would ask him, he would say no. Lee White Jones is controlling him. He's going to run this and--

Curvin

The opposition was also pretty [crosstalk]-

West

Oh, that's nasty stuff.

Curvin

-ugly and dramatic literature about your relationship [**unintelligible 00:18:23**].

West

One literature that I had to laugh at, they had some quotes that Baraka had written, it was poetry. They had a quote for me, which said, "Baraka says, Black folks should control everything," and next to that, it would say, "Gibson says, Baraka has good ideas."

[laughter]

I had to explain that stuff every day, for some reason or another.

Curvin

What about [**unintelligible 00:19:05**]?

West

[**unintelligible 00:19:07**], because he was an artist, and as you know, the artistic community and their agents knew each other. They would go places together. The artists would go and have meetings and they would come up with ideas and they had involved [**unintelligible 00:19:35**], and those people would socialize with the writers and artists and they all came in to work in the campaign.

Curvin

Who were some of the others that came in? Dick Gregory?

West

Dick Gregory campaign would be in '66. We had Gregory, we had--

Curvin

In 1970?

West

In '70, he came in. We had little Stevie Wonder, who was little Steven Wonder then. We had the movie star, Dustin Hoffman. We had-- I mentioned Belafonte.

Curvin

Right. They all walked with you?

West

They walked around with us. We walked in Broad markets street in the North. We had a rally at [**unintelligible 00:20:32**] Park.

Curvin

What about fundraising the money? There was the Newark fund, and then, there was also your campaign fund. Did the Newark fund produce a good share of the support for the campaign?

**West**

No. In fact, they spent most of whatever they were able to raise.

**Curvin**

Spent on what?

**West**

On PR.

**Curvin**

PR?

**West**

They hired a PR firm. They spent a lot of money hiring this guy who was really good. I liked the guy but they didn't have enough money to pay him. We ended up spending any money that they could raise on public relations, but it did some great--

**Curvin**

Where did you raise your money from?

**West**

We had money that was raised at traditional entities. We had cocktail parties, we had Block Club meetings. We used to call it coffee klatches and we had fundraisers like the traditional organizations.

**Curvin**

Suburbanites?

**West**

Some Suburbanites gave us money but they didn't come through Baraka's operation. It came because basically, we were involved in civil rights organization. You and others knew people who had money. We didn't have it but we knew people who did have money and they did contribute to our campaign.

**Curvin**

You mentioned earlier about a particular fundraiser in New York that you went to. At the end of the day, you were expecting to get [crosstalk] contribution? You don't have to mention the name.

**West**

I thought I would make a lot of money, that is true.

**Curvin**

This is an artist?

**West**

Yes, we were in the middle of New York City in Manhattan. It wasn't too far from Lincoln Center. They had a townhouse. I think it was in the '40s and '50s, going up there. I can almost picture the house. I had these movie stars. Stars of stage, screen, and radio all standing on the steps while I'm making my speech. I finished and I got a couple of checks. I looked at the checks and I said, something is wrong here. I got two \$25 checks-

**Curvin**

Really?

**West**

-from world-renowned movie stars. I should have kept them. I still kick myself for not keeping those ones.

**Curvin**

This was pretty much the way in which that community and they gave you publicity but they didn't give you, and that was-

West

They had no money.

Curvin

-disappointing. You raised your own money, you had to--

West

We raised our own money from--

Curvin

You had people here in the suburbs, in the community that really raised the money.

West

We had people who knew me and knew you, and other people who believed in what we were doing and they made contributions. I never will forget, we had a house party on Easter Sunday in Rhoda Lieberman's house. It snowed that night before, if you'll recall, and we tracked snow in that lady's house.

Curvin

We had someone hired from New York.

West

They gave us a lot of money but they had nothing to do with Baraka. They were involved in CORN and other civil rights organizations and they believed in what we were doing.

Curvin

There was this great day when you got into the run-off and then won the run-off election and you have the support of some of the white candidates or at least, one critical white candidate, that everyone felt would support [unintelligible 00:25:18], but ended up supporting you. How did you work that out?

West

It was John Caulfield. John Caulfield had been fire director under [unintelligible 00:25:31] When he took a leave, or he resigned to run for mayor. When it was all over, he decided that he couldn't support [unintelligible 00:25:47] and came to support me. I'll never forget, his wife took a battering in the event or something. She was cursed and they threw rocks at her.

Curvin

His wife from the city?

West

Yes. Jack Caulfield stood up he said he just couldn't support [unintelligible 00:26:20]. He gave us basically, I would call it cover. There were not a lot of votes coming out of that support but what was coming was the credibility for our campaign because I didn't have to explain him as I had to explain Baraka.

Curvin

What about Steve [unintelligible 00:26:51]? At some point--

West

[chuckles] [unintelligible 00:26:57] came onboard. [unintelligible 00:26:59] was and is still is an opportunist, in a true sense of the word and in a good sense of the word. I met him for the first time at your house, if you recall. It was a Huntington terrace, Huntington whatever.

Curvin

Right. [unintelligible 00:27:23]

**West**

If I remember, he was squatting at that time. He started talking about building this organization. I helped him put it together and when the campaign came, I think he put his finger in his mouth and held it up and let the wind blow at it and decide which way he was going to-- He didn't do anything, really, till the end. At the very end, he said a couple of good things about the campaign but he didn't do anything. He couldn't deliver any votes over there, if you recall. Maybe his wife had a couple of other people but he's smart enough and he still is smart enough to be able to judge the shifting in the sand, the way the wind was blowing. He knew the wind was blowing in our direction. It wasn't hard to figure out.

Anybody who could count could tell that we had a chance to win that election. Most people didn't believe we were going to win it but most people who could count politically knew that we had a good chance of winning. [unintelligible 00:28:59]'s public support was basically something that helped him frankly, over the years. We did a lot.

**Curvin**

After you took office, was he considered an ally in future campaigns?

**West**

Steve was never considered an ally until the campaign started but he was considered as somebody who should have been an ally. We helped to build that organization we gave a lot of money from the city, we put the entire city forces together when they had a fire in the building, I don't know if you recall that but the building was seriously damaged in the fire. Myself and John Caulfield and a couple of other people went over there and we promised him we would help him put it back together.

**Curvin**

We did. We helped to rebuild the building, but he'll tell anybody that if it weren't for what we did, that he would never have been able to survive.

**Curvin**

Do you feel that the support that you gave him was returned in kind?

**West**

Not really. Let me put it in a true sense. My feeling about [unintelligible 00:30:31] and the Northwood education and cultural center was, what they did for the city, for the community, was what they should have been doing. Anybody who wanted to that, and I said that to a lot of people who criticized me for supporting him. Why don't you do that for us? I said, if you do what Steve's been able to do, put together educational programs and training programs, then I'll do it for you.

He is still, in my opinion, one of the most successful operations that the cities has ever seen, but as for the community, it wasn't-- Steve will tell you right now that he's a political animal. If it's in the best interest of his program, and his thing, then he'll undo it. It's not politics.

**Curvin**

You're saying the community had benefited from that tradeoff.

**West**

Yes. If you go with him, and I do that on occasion, to watch those kids at those schools, and watch what they do and watch what those people do, it's a tremendous benefit. That's what it's all about.

**Curvin**

Let's now switch to Mayor Gibson takes over in 1970 and we have this council that some of them are on the ticket with you but the majority of them were basically supporters of [unintelligible 00:32:24].

What it was like being under the council?

**West**

It was difficult.

[laughter]

West

We had a couple of people who do knew to talk to them. [unintelligible 00:32:40], who you know, was very good at dealing with-- He was there when I took office and was able to talk to a lot of the guys. We had the likes of Marie Palani.

Curvin

She was still on the council at that time?

West

She was on the council. Quite a lot of people underestimated her. That's how she was able to be as successful. In fact, my mother said to me one time when the campaign was coming up. I said, "Mom, we've been waiting for the campaign." She says, "I'm voting for Marie, I don't care who else you're with." [laughs] She had a thing with the senior citizens. She was very, very effective in dealing with them. She was good. Mickey Vaughn Tempo got me in trouble because of the water thing. It was tough dealing with those guys.

[unintelligible 00:33:51], if you remember, was-- [unintelligible 00:33:55], whatever people thought about him, he was still one of the brightest individuals on that city council. If he had not had this problem, he would have probably been close to being governor of the state.

Curvin

What was this problem?

West

Gambling. He would bet on a raindrop coming down the window. He was very, very-- A disease, but as far as technical ability, he was [unintelligible 00:34:36] People who have God-given talents and have problems, whether it be drinking or gambling, or other vices, they never reach their full potential because of those bugs.

Curvin

In a way, the council was major stumbling block.

West

They were a major, major problem. You always had to negotiate. It's a trade. I go up to the council, I needed this, I need that. I said, "I want to vote for you but my cousin had this problem over here. My uncle has this truck over here." You always had to negotiate.

Curvin

Would you say that they were more interested in jobs and [unintelligible 00:35:41]?

West

Yes. They were not bad people but were traditional politicians.

Curvin

To some extent, that's an enduring tension-

West

Oh, yes.

Curvin

-with legislators and the local [unintelligible 00:35:59] particularly, right?

West

It's just the way things have been done and continue to be done in our society.

Curvin

1974, the council began to change and we began to get more minority African [crosstalk] representation on the council, but it did not necessarily change the nature of the relationship.

West

Not necessarily. It helped in many respects because they had to go to the same places I went to. [chuckles] I used to have [unintelligible 00:36:44] with some these guys. I say, "You got to go to the same party I have to go to." It was difficult. They ended up with the majority of African Americans.

Curvin

That happened maybe in 1978?

West

Yes, '78, at least. I told them that they should pick the president of the council. They shouldn't let the other guys pick the president. They should pick. June 30th, I told them, "You guys pick it." I'll put them together in that penthouse office, right next to the federal building. I said, "You guys pick it and go up there, come up with the council president. If you don't come up with the president, I'm going to pick it." Two o'clock in the morning, I got a call from George [unintelligible 00:37:59], who was on a cast. He said, "I hate to tell you," he says, "We had no agreement." I said, "Come on, George." I said, "You guys can cut cars, do something." He said, "They won't do it," so I picked the president of the council.

Curvin

Who did you pick?

West

Ralph Grant. I made enemies with everybody else who wanted to be president.

Curvin

Why did you pick Grant or the attributes?

West

You knew Ralph as well as I, he had class. He could talk. He'd weaved a story, he made a good presentation. I figured it for the first time, we had somebody who could actually be the president of the council. I think he did a good job.

Curvin

Until he got--

West

Then he got into trouble.

Curvin

He fell vulnerable to--

West

Vulnerable to the same-- Not the same kind of thing that they use now. These guys-- I still say and I get in trouble every time I say this. I think that when [unintelligible 00:39:26] is used in [unintelligible 00:39:28], I call it an [unintelligible 00:39:29]. They come to you with a briefcase full of money. They say, you do this and you do this.

Curvin

They're undercover.

West

They're undercover and they do that to public officials. They don't do it to other people. They don't get their names in the headlines for less than US congressmen and senators. You remember

Asghan?

Curvin

Right.

West

That was entrapment. I don't care what they say and they got away with it. Pete Williams, who was the senator, the US senator. They put him in jail because they put a piece of the paper in his overnight bag on his plane. They gave him stock in a titanium mine, and they used that to convict him. They tried me five times. Pete [**unintelligible 00:40:38**] got stuck by one of his friends.

Curvin

Well, you had the presence and the insight to know that something ill was up, I would assume.

West

Well, I'd like to say that, yes, I do, but that's not the truth.

Curvin

No.

West

The fact to everybody is-- you got some shaky dude look at you in the face saying that he wants to bring somebody into the city with \$100 million dollars to do development. You had to be a little bit suspicious of that guy.

[laughter]

Curvin

Sound like a Nigerian.

West

Yes.

[laughter]

West

Guy got a thing hanging around his neck with a gold chain and he's got \$100 million. You got to be kidding me.

[laughter]

West

They did that down in Atlanta City at that particular meeting, conference of mayors, they ended up with at least two mayors. One was Angelo Errichetti, the Mayor of Camden, and two or three other people. They had a suite at the Resorts International hotel down there. They had a table as big as--

Curvin

The prosecutors, you mean?

West

Yes.

Curvin

The undercover--

West

Well, the guy who was--

Curvin

Yes. He was [crosstalk]- -

West

The guy's name was Mel Weinberg. Never forget that guy. They had a table as big as this full of liquor, cigars, fruit. He says-- I didn't want to meet with these guys, but one of my staff people kept saying, "The guy's going to help us out with our campaign." "Listen, I didn't come down here to talk to somebody about the campaign." When I finally reluctantly met with this guy, and he says, "Well,

we want to come to the City of Newark and we got people with \$100 million and we want to do land development." I said, "Great." I said, "I have a development team. You can meet with the development team. If they think your idea is good and they bring it to me, then they will consider." "We don't want to meet with a lot of people." I said, "Look, we only do business one way. You meet with the team or you don't meet with the team. The team thinks you have a good idea to look at." The guy hands me a card. He said, "We'd like to come pick you up in our limousine." I said, "Look, I don't ride in limousines." If you recall, at that time [chuckles] I was riding around in a checker car because people didn't know I didn't have any money. They'd be riding around with a limousine and all that kind of stuff.

Curvin

Or [unintelligible 00:43:36].

West

Yes.

[laughter]

West

The guy said, "We'll come and pick you up and bring you down to our condo." I said, "Oh, man." He said, "Have a drink." I said, "I don't drink." "Have a smoke." "I don't smoke." I said, "Look, I'm not impressed with any of the stuff that you thought about." Sure enough, about three or four months later, I'm making a speech for Jimmy Carter up in Buffalo, New York. I'm just getting into bed, I'm tired, running all around. Buffalo's cold anyway. Telephone rings in the room and says, "Man, Gibson, how much money did you take?" I said, "What are you talking about?" [chuckles] "Oh, didn't you see the dudes?" I said, "No." They had just arrested about seven people-

Curvin

All from this.

West

-all from this scam.

Curvin

This guy [inaudible 00:44:34].

West

This gal. Not just [unintelligible 00:44:36], in Washington too. They got some people in Washington. They had a whole lot of people. I said, "You got to be kidding me." I had taken that card. I got back to my office and I told [unintelligible 00:44:51], I said, "Put this underneath your bladder." I said, "One of these days, I think, we're going to need this card." Sure enough, it was the same guy.

Curvin

The same guy.

West

Same guy.

Curvin

Now, you make the point though about the unfairness of the pursuit of political figures, but don't you agree that political figures have a special case or responsibility of doing that?

West

Oh, yes.

Curvin

[crosstalk] public trust.

West

Well, I'm not sure about the public trust, but they have the responsibility.

Curvin

They have the public responsibility.

West

Yes. The problem that I'm dealing with, Curvin, is that if you took that same tactic and used it on lawyers or doctors or engineers or any other profession, how many would you get?

Curvin

You get a lot.

[crosstalk]

West

Well, they target public officials because they can get their name in the paper. They use it as a stepping stone to become a federal judge. If you recall the history of some of these guys, Fred Lacey, if you recall, had to be a federal judge after having been responsible for Anesia, right?

Curvin

Right.

West

I'm not saying Anesia was anybody's angel. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that when you use the prosecutorial powers only against public officials, but there's something wrong with that. Use it against everybody if that's what you're going to do. You use it against public officials because you get the name [unintelligible 00:46:53], then there's something wrong with that. Use it against everybody, if that's what you're going to do. You use it against public officials because you get their name on the paper. You get to be a beneficiary. You get to be a federal judge, Curvin Stern.

Curvin

Or run for the governor.

West

Or run for governor like Christie. Right?

Curvin

Yes.

West

If you go to use it just to benefit yourself, then, I think, there's something wrong. I'm not saying that public officials should not be targets.

Curvin

You're not suggesting that Newark [unintelligible 00:47:32] pick on them or anything?

West

No, not just Newark. Christie, God bless him. John Lynch who was a Democrat and a few other people. You got [unintelligible 00:47:46] who was a Republican. I'm not saying that, but they used the public officials is what I'm saying. Why not a couple of lawyers?

Curvin

Or doctors?

West

Or a couple of doctors. You don't get the same press with lawyers and doctors.

Curvin

Let me ask you again about, maybe, being the mayor in 1970 at a time when the city was really just coming out of its horrible period of polarization, the rebellion, a lot of racial antagonism in the city.

What were you able to do in that environment? What were some of your accomplishments?

West

Well, I'd love to be able to say that we reduced the tension level between the races. That's not what our goal was. Our goal was to approve the delivery services. What I think I was able to do was to set the climate for improvement. If I had been a rebel-arousing type politician who talked about Black and White all the time, then I don't think we would've been able to get people to sit down at the same table and talk. My style has always been reserved. Therefore, it was easier to get people to come to the table. I think that helped.

Not anything that I could say we had a lock on. Just my God-given nature is a bit-- I'm on the Z side of the equation. The type A type people that-- if I were a guy who did like [unintelligible 00:50:01] then I don't think we're able-- we made the kind of progress that, I think, we made a new one. After a while, people decided, "This guy's not so bad, maybe sit down and talk to him."

Curvin

Don't you think that that was one of the reasons why you ended up as the candidate and being elected-

West

Oh, yes. I think so.

Curvin

-because you were calm and-

West

More acceptable.

Curvin

-reasonable to the problems that the city was facing.

West

The other thing is we were able to do because of that was we set up a neighborhood health center program that benefited from federal government money, from the Health Education and Welfare Department. We had a center in every major part of the city. If you recall, Newark had the worst health statistics, some of the worst health statistics in the nation, tuberculosis rate, urinal disease rate, death, and mortality rate, maternal mortality rate. We were able to approve all of those indices within two or three years.

I can safely say-- can identify 'em, but there are some children alive today, a world at that time that would not have survived. Under the existing conditions that existed when we took office. We were able to save people's lives. That in my opinion is more important than all the other stuff. Whether you get elected or not get elected, this is second, third, and fourth to that.

Curvin

You got housing in the area of housing?

West

Housing, we were able to do some things that little bit different than in the past. For us, that's the senior citizen housing that you see still existed. [unintelligible 00:52:20] James C. White Manor on 516 Bergen Street, Branchport Park housing, the ones that exist over on [unintelligible 00:52:38].

Curvin

The city do those in--

West

Housing authority.

Curvin

Through the housing authority? [unintelligible 00:52:43].

West

Right. They were HUD programs, but we had to set the stage for that. We had to tell them to do that. We had to make it easier for them to do that.

Curvin

You hired Junius Williams as one of the activists in the community, he's running all the city's programs. Within 18 months or 2 years or so, there was a lot of conflict within the program with you, with the program as well. What happened with Mile City?

West

Well, it was not just-- Well, I don't know. Was it called Mile City then? I guess it was.

Curvin

[crosstalk] community development. It was the office of community development-

West

I don't know-

Curvin

-at the time.

West

-what it was, but Junius really wanted that position, and I gave it to him. He put together, in my opinion, a good staff. Remember Dave Dennison, Barry Washington?

Curvin

Yes.

West

Those guys who created cable television. They did it on my time, I think.

Curvin

They didn't.

[laughter]

West

Anyway, they're bright guys and girls. Junius had and still has, I think, unique talents. He would lose his energy every now and then. We got into a struggle with HUD trying to justify some expenditures, I don't know if you recall, but they had some conferences and they went out of town and they spent some money on this and spent some money on that. We would first go down, defend that one.

Thought I had a great meeting down in Washington in the HUD office.

I told Junius, "You're ready, Junius?" "Yes, I'm ready." "Well, let me see what you got." "Don't worry about it, everything's fine." We got down there and the guy said, "Okay, to explain yourself, [unintelligible 00:55:10] he didn't have my level of what the illegal pad has done, drawn some circles on it." I said, "Oh God." [chuckles] It was a [unintelligible 00:55:23] because he had really not done his homework. The guys called me and said, " If you want to keep your money, here's what you had to do."

Curvin

What happened? Here's a guy who's a lawyer, [crosstalk]- -

West

Not only a lawyer.

Curvin

[crosstalk] lawyer, very bright.

West

Extremely bright.

Curvin

[unintelligible 00:55:46] meeting not prepared to answer important questions.

West

Junius always had the neck of assuming that he was smarter than everybody in the room, and that's the danger because so many people are not as dumb as you think they are. [chuckles] [unintelligible 00:56:12] for that.

Curvin

He is.

West

I don't know if he still does. We did a historical program up at the temple, if you remember, on Broadway. Junius was there on a panel with a couple of his young men, his two sons, I think, they were both there. He was really good. He still remembers-

Curvin

All the details.

West

-all the details. He remembers stuff that I forgot.

Curvin

In the final analysis, coming back to [unintelligible 00:57:01] or you made the decision, [crosstalk]- -

West

Yes, we came to a mutual agreement.

Curvin

Was that a great disappointment to you?

West

Junius, two or three other people, was a disappointment, and I knew that he had better capabilities than he demonstrated. I'm always frustrated when I see people with that kind of ability who don't use it as effectively as I think they should.

Curvin

[unintelligible 00:57:49] You've gone through model cities, what about policing in the city of [unintelligible 00:57:58] the police department, did you ever feel that you ever really got administrative control over the department?

West

Oh, yes, it took a while. The day I was being sworn in, I had decided that I was going to make John Redden police director. John had this super-duper clear in the head image. I put him in charge of police department. I knew, first of all, he will eliminate the corruption staff because he was just not going to tolerate that. When the guys over at the council found out that I was going to make John Redden the police director, they sent a word to me through the City Clerk Harry Rogerson that they weren't going to approve him. No reason, but they weren't going to approve him. Now, you know the reason, there were a couple of old cops on the [unintelligible 00:59:08], being one. I think it was-- Oh, Juliana, was also [unintelligible 00:59:16] former policeman on the council.

They hated Redding because Redding was too much of a straight hour for them. Here it is, I was supposed to get sworn in at noon on July 1st. Word comes down, they're not going to approve the police director. I told everybody about Harry--

Curvin

Just to keep the record straight, as I recall, Denis [unintelligible 00:59:53], one of the Black council that was opposed to Redden.

West

Right, because he wanted Black.

Curvin

He wanted the Black.

West

He wasn't opposed to Redden.

Curvin

I say, he wasn't going to vote for any White.

West

That's right.

Curvin

He voted against any white.

West

That's right.

Curvin

[unintelligible 01:00:09].

West

That was his problem. I told Harry [unintelligible 01:00:16], I said, "Well, if you recall Broad street was blocked off." All Broad street was closed off. That must have been half million people in the Broad street. I told her [unintelligible 01:00:29] I said, "No." [unintelligible 01:00:31] "Why? Either I get my police director or I'm going outside and tell the people that you guys just want corruption." [laughs] The word came back that Redden was approved.

Curvin

[laughs].

West

No, of course, you can't surrender the principles. It wasn't a question of Black police director or White police director.

Curvin

Right.

West

I just felt that, at that time, for me to go immediately to a Black police director was not in the best interest of the city. I just didn't. Not that I was opposed, it just that I didn't think that was-- I knew that Redden could not be criticized.

West

Right.

Curvin

That's the reason I wouldn't, and I knew that, after a while, that I was going to go to a Black police director. [unintelligible 01:01:33]. Now, I didn't get control of police department. Redden was a nice guy and a straight arrow but there's certain guys within the police department he couldn't control because they had their own items.

West

You mean items related to forces outside of the department?

Curvin

Right. Outside the department. Gambling.

West

Gambling.

Curvin

Corruption.

West

Corruption.

Curvin

[unintelligible 01:01:58].

West

Everything.

Curvin

Everything. Did you ever feel threatened by those guys?

West

No.

Curvin

No?

West

No, because there were some guys around me that were just as crazy as any of those guys. They're next, so those guys still around me [laughs]. You can't surrender the street. One of the advantages that we always had, we had the streets. We might not have been able to do as much as we wanted to with but we had the streets. Remember that the scene in *Malcolm*, when he went to the police station and this kid had been beaten up, and he marched the FOI guys down the street?

Curvin

Right.

West

He demanded to see this guy and take him out of [unintelligible 01:03:06] get him some police.

Curvin

Right.

West

He went to the door and the police captain said to him, "What about those guys out in the street, he do this?" Oh, I got one of those guys.

[laughter]

Curvin

Comes in handy.

West

Yes. I'll tell you. That was a scene-- it was in solitary confinement in state prison, and there was a rumor that there was going to be a riot in the prison. One of the guards said to the warden, he said, "Well, I know who could let you know what's happening." He said, "This guy is-- Who is that?" he says. Okay, we get downstairs. He brought him up to the warden's office. Then the warden said, "That ward is going to be the riot." [unintelligible 01:04:14] He said, "What do you think?" He says, "Don't worry about it." [laughter]

Curvin

You had guys got it like that?

West

I still have him.

Curvin

You still have him?

West

Yes.

Curvin

Great.

West

You see, the problem that we have is that you got to control the streets. You might not be able to control the economic world with all in the community. If you don't control the streets then you can't survive.

Curvin

Do you think that the absence of controlling the streets today comes from some of the crime that we have?

West

Yes.

Curvin

The police department still-- or not only the police department, but it's the whole system?

West

The whole system.

Curvin

Not working.

West

See, those guys don't have the respect of the police guys. They won't work with them. They just won't work with them. All I got right now. They ask him two or three questions here, he then say, "Well, I can do this," but they won't work with those guys.

Curvin

Do you think there's a disconnect between the enforcement and the need to have control and effective policing [crosstalk] in the community?

West

That's right.

Curvin

Let's talk a little bit about development. You mentioned the senior housing with the housing authority. What about downtown [unintelligible 01:06:01]? Any significant projects that happened under your watch?

West

Oh, yes. One of the advantages of downtown guys is you don't have to worry about development down there. Their only concern is whether or not they're going to be safe. The biggest argument I have with them is that they wanted to set up a separate policing district, taxing district. They wanted to collect special taxes and have their own little police department.

Curvin

Right.

West

They didn't care about the rest of the city. The biggest fight I had with those guys is I wouldn't let 'em do that.

Curvin

Okay.

West

They're not going to be two cities. Not going to be a tale of two cities as long as I'm there. They didn't like me for that, but as far as development, the public service, new office building, if you recall that old building used to be down there. I told those guys, "Give me one building as a symbol of your commitment to the city." It ended up being public service.

Curvin

Had they considered moving out?

West

Yes, but I didn't think they would. Potential threaten every week to move out. They ended up doing that building and that entire gateway center down there. Gateway one, gateway two, gateway three, gateway four, all financed by credential.

Curvin

I would assume that they benefited from certain subsidies now that they were doing this credential.

West

Certainly.

[laughter]

West

Fox lands tax abatement.

Curvin

Fox lands. What about land subsidy from [crosstalk]?

West

Some, yes. Some from the housing authorities, some from the city. Well, they got benefits. They didn't do anything for nothing.

Curvin

Right.

West

They were not charitable.

Curvin

They're not in that business.

West

No. All those buildings were developed and built, subsidized.

Curvin

When did the New York Economic Development Corporation form, and that came--

West

That was not new. It was a continuation of something that [unintelligible 01:09:02] had.

Curvin

I see.

West

I don't think they call it Economic Development Corporation. They call it something else. It was a combination between the Chamber of Commerce and the city. I'm trying to think of that guy's name, who ran that. We institutionalized it.

Curvin

Right.

West

[unintelligible 01:09:32] NEDC.

Curvin

NEDC was not a city agency?

West

No.

Curvin

It was a-

West

Private.

Curvin

-private.

West

Corporation.

Curvin

Corporation.

West

Subsidized by the corporation to the Chamber of Commerce and the city.

Curvin

And the city?

West

Right.

Curvin

Then when did Al [unintelligible 01:09:52] take it over?

West

Al came in-- I'm not sure exactly what year it was. It was shortly after the chamber guys got tired.

Curvin

They got tired of running [crosstalk]- -

West

Guy's name was Henry Connor. I don't know if you remember [crosstalk]. Yes. He was the guy who ran it on that [unintelligible 01:10:12].

Curvin

Right.

West

When we took it over, they had gotten tired. The Chamber of Commerce didn't want to put it in more money and the city had to do everything. Of course, that gave us all the control. [unintelligible 01:10:28] it brings giving Al [unintelligible 01:10:30] all the control. That's what happened.

Curvin

Yes. How did he manage to walk away with such a huge chunk of assets?

West

Well, if you--

Curvin

Many people believed along with the city.

West

If you look at the word that they're using these days is under these bailout programs, what do they call it? There's a word they use for.

Curvin

The stimulus.

West

Yes, but there's a word they use for watching people.

[silence]

Curvin

The Washington people?

West

Watching.

Curvin

Watching?

West

Yes, I don't think the word mattered anyway, but there was nobody watching the store, so to speak.

Curvin

There was no oversight.

West

That's it. Yes. That's the word, but there's another word-

Curvin

Another word?

West

-that goes with that.

Curvin

Okay.

West

Yes, so then Al was not being watched.

Curvin

It was not being watched.

West

The chamber no longer existed.

Curvin

Whose responsibility was it to watch?

West

His board.

Curvin

His board?

West

Which he picked.

Curvin

Which he picked. He was able to create a system where he could benefit.

West

It's like a guy creating his board and his board is selected by him. Then his board sets his salary, sets his controls. It's much like many major corporations in this country right now. If you look at them, they're selected by the CEO.

Curvin

In your view, these arrangements that he had on these deal was not illegal.

West

No, I don't think there's anything illegal about it. There's a question of whether or not they were appropriate under the controls. They should have been there to control the executive. I think if you look at all the corporations today, what's the major corporation, the insurance company that's just about to fold?

Curvin

AIG.

West

AIG?

Curvin

Yes.

West

Nobody's watching all those guys. I listened to Bloomberg this morning, these guys are running wild. [chuckles].

Curvin

Absolutely.

West

Our father didn't do anything that these guys didn't do.

Curvin

Right.

West

Always have accused him of being illegal, but whether or not somebody should have been watching the store.

Curvin

Well, was any [unintelligible 01:13:39] still exist or-- because at some point, you must eventually went into the Mayor's office [inaudible 01:13:46] Mayor James.

West

Right. I don't know if technically it exists. I believe that legally it exists.

Curvin

I see.

West

I don't believe that there's anybody still serving on the board, or if they do, they don't meet. If they meet, they don't have anything to do.

Curvin

With all said and done, what are the words of wisdom that you would like to leave for future generations about being in politics, fighting to make a city better? That has a lot of problems. What could you leave as your-- What would you want to say as your final? What do you want people to remember you by?

West

Well, it's not so much to remember me because I never had an ego problem. I'm not sure if that's good or bad.

Curvin

Maybe you're the only politician that can say that.

West

Oh, you got to look yourself in the mirror. I think that's what gives me the greatest satisfaction. I shouldn't say the greatest satisfaction, my greatest satisfaction I got, Curvin, is when somebody

walks up to me-- and it happens all the time, my wife will tell you. We could be sitting and having lunch or something. Somebody will walk up and say, "You don't know me. There's no reason for you to know me, but if it weren't for you, what you did for me to get this job, my daughter would not have been able to go to college. Now, she's married and has her own children." That happen to me all the time. The satisfaction I get is for having been able to help somebody.

I mentioned children that survived because we improved the infant mortality rate. I can't find any of those kids. I can't identify them, but I know some of them are out. There was a young man who walked up to me one day and [unintelligible 01:16:29], had to be too tall to be taller than me, but the kid [unintelligible 01:16:32] he said, "You know me?" He said, "You don't remember me?" He said, "When I was in the hospital over the Christmas and you came around to the hospital and you gave me a game." He said, "I couldn't go home for Christmas." He said, "That was the only gift I got that Christmas." They don't do that anymore, Curvin. [laughs].

West

I did that every Christmas. I went to every hospital in this city and passed out gifts to the kids, for kids who couldn't go home. Those kids who get the job, another kid walked up to me at Jay's down on [unintelligible 01:17:17] Street. He said his wife told him not to bother me. He came over, he said, "I just looked your record up, found that you went to night school and I decided that if you could do that and get to be mayor, then I could go and improve myself." He says, "Now, I'm a scientist with the federal government because of what you were able to do." That's the satisfaction I get. I don't need accolades.

Curvin

How do you feel about the city today and where it's at, and what its prospects are? There's a lot of talk about a Renaissance. What in your mind is [unintelligible 01:18:08]?

West

What scares me about it is the educational system. Our kids can't write, they can't read, they can't do basic math. How are we going to compete with the world? I visited Japan, where they go to school six days a week, or you get a telephone call, and to get to some service on the equipment that you just bought, and the telephones they answered in India. There's something wrong with our system where we can't compete. That's what's frustrating me. I don't see a Renaissance when our children can't write. I don't know if you've seen any of the material that the kids write today in applying for college applications, you wouldn't let your children turn that in.

What are we doing? How would you like to have a doctor treating you and operating on you who can't read? That's scary stuff,-

Curvin

It happened.

West

-and that's what bothers me.

Curvin

Yes. Do you think there are ways that we can do better?

West

Well, I know there are ways to do better. I went to school in a time when you wouldn't go to the fourth grade, to the fifth grade, unless you knew the material from the fourth grade. I know we could do better. The question is whether or not we want to fight and go back to the basis because I know we can do it. If somebody else in another country can do it, we could do it.

Curvin  
We could do it.

End of Audio.